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ABSTRACT

Noting that kindergarten entry is a major milestone for all young children and their families and that this transition to school can set the tone for the child's future school experiences, this booklet was developed to promote communication and understanding among Vermont parents, caregivers, and schools to ensure that all children experience a smooth transition to kindergarten and have a positive school experience. The booklet contains explanations of what parents can expect when their child enters school and a glossary of common terms. The major part of the booklet is devoted to commonly asked questions about kindergarten, related to: (1) registration and screening; (2) kindergarten placement; (3) orientation; (4) school calendar and school day; (5) transportation; (6) the classroom teacher and curriculum; (7) parent involvement in school; and (8) unique accommodations. Space is provided for parents or caregivers to note additional questions or information to share with the school as they prepare children for kindergarten. Five appendices list: guiding concepts on transitions; the emotional foundations of school readiness; five dimensions of children's school readiness; provisions for children with unique accommodations; and books to share with children entering kindergarten. (KB)

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# Off to Kindergarten

## A Booklet for Parents, Caregivers, and Schools

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*Prepared by*
The Transition to School Committee
*of the*
Vermont Early Childhood Work Group

DECEMBER 2000



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# Vermont's Vision For Young Children And Their Families

Every family in Vermont has the right to comprehensive, high quality child development services appropriate for its children. Every Vermont community shall nurture the healthy development of young children and strengthen families. To support communities, the state of Vermont will create a unified system of child development services which shares common standards for quality and respects the diversity and uniqueness of individuals and programs.

*Off to Kindergarten: A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Schools* was produced by the Transition to School Committee of the Vermont Early Childhood Work Group to support Vermont's Vision for Young Children and Their Families.

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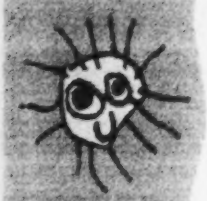
# Off to Kindergarten

A Booklet for Parents, Caregivers, and Schools

*Prepared by*
The Transition to School Committee
*of the*
Vermont Early Childhood Work Group

December 2000



# Off to Kindergarten

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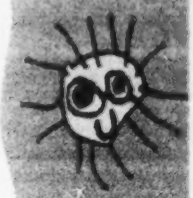
# INTRODUCTION



Going to kindergarten is a major milestone for all young children and their families. It signals a new level of independence for the child and entry into the world of academic and social expectations.

The transition to school is an important part of the child's educational experience, and often sets the tone for the child's future school experiences. A thoughtful, positive transition can help the child and family view school and learning favorably. Children who enter kindergarten eager to learn and expecting to be successful are more likely to be successful in school and to accomplish their goals in life. These positive attitudes toward learning start when we are very young and persist throughout our adult years.

There are many questions to be answered and issues to be addressed when it comes to understanding a child's transition to school. Parents and others want answers to their questions because they will help them prepare their child for kindergarten. *Off to Kindergarten* was developed to promote communication and understanding among parents, caregivers, and schools to ensure that all children have a smooth transition to kindergarten and a positive school experience.

*Off to Kindergarten* contains brief explanations of what parents can expect when the time comes for their child to enter school. It also contains questions parents commonly have and places to write down additional things to share as you prepare for your child's transition to kindergarten. While the guide is particularly useful for parents, it also may be helpful for all the partners as they plan for a successful transition to kindergarten for all children.

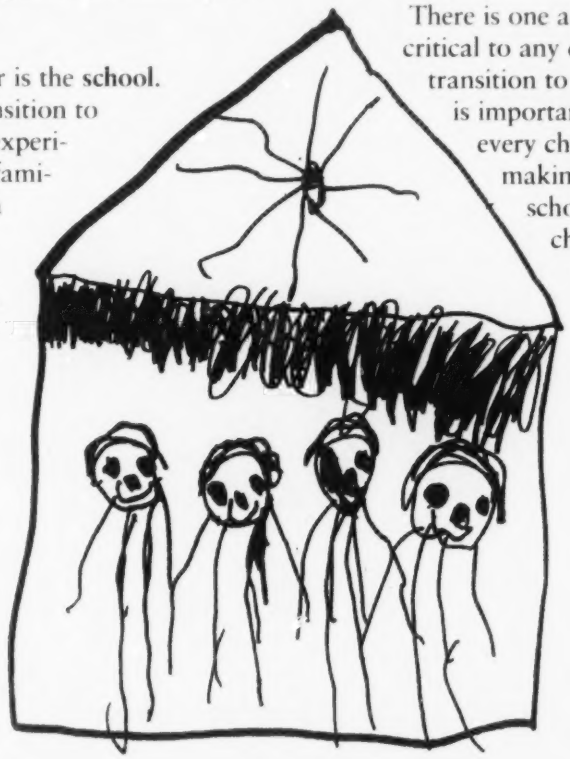
# EVERYONE HAS SOMETHING TO OFFER

A successful transition to kindergarten begins well before the first day of school and involves parents, caregivers, and schools. Early and frequent communication among these partners is crucial.

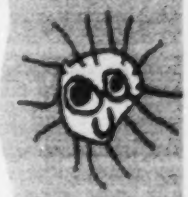
As their child's first and most important teachers, **parents** play a primary role in ensuring that this transition proceeds smoothly for their child.

Another key partner is the **school**. To ensure that the transition to school is a successful experience for children and families, schools organize a variety of activities to help children and families become familiar with what to expect when kindergarten begins in the Fall.

**Early education and care providers** also play an important role in the transition process. Many young children today spend a large portion of their day in care settings and/or with a preschool educator. These providers have valuable information to share and can assist in making the transition to kindergarten smooth and effective.



There is one additional voice that is critical to any discussion about the transition to school – **the child**'s. It is important to include and value every child's thoughts about making the transition to school. By working with children and not just for them, we can make the transition to kindergarten a positive experience that will leave lasting impressions.



# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSITIONS

Adults play very important roles in shaping how children feel when they head off to kindergarten. When parents, caregivers, and school personnel understand how important the transition to kindergarten is for the child and what things are involved, they can do things that will make the difference between tears and smiles on the first day of school.

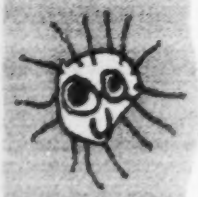
There are many issues involved in school readiness and transitions. These are often intertwined and somewhat confusing. In thinking about transition, parents and teachers wonder about what it takes for a child to be "ready" for school and how schools can be "ready" to welcome all children.

Transition is best thought of as an ongoing process involving the family, early education and care providers, and the elementary school staff. The basic elements of a comprehensive transition process include:

- Registration
- Screening
- Orientation
- Transition Planning

These elements and others will be described in greater detail throughout this booklet.

Successful transitions do not just happen for children; they are the result of careful planning. Planning successful transitions involves addressing issues of continuity, consistency, communication, and collaboration. When successful planning happens, children and adults know what to expect and how to work together.



# Common Terms You May Hear

**Accommodations** – Special arrangements made concerning the facility or education program that suits an individual child's needs for participation. This term is often used concerning arrangements for children with special needs.

**Cut-off Date** – The date by which children must turn five years of age in order to attend kindergarten. Schools may select any date between August 31 and December 31; the majority use September 1 as the cut-off date.

**Early Education and Care Providers** – Adults providing early education and child care services in a variety of settings (e.g., Head Start, child care centers and homes, public schools, etc.)

**Essential Early Education (EEE)** – Early childhood special education program serving eligible children ages 3 – 5 years.

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP)** – A plan developed for children participating in EEE outlining their identified needs, goals and accommodations. IEPs are legal documents ensuring children's rights and are developed by a team involving parents, special and general education personnel, and others.

**Orientation** – Activities designed to familiarize children and parents with the kindergarten environment and program before school starts.

**Readiness** – A broad term used to describe how well a person or program is prepared for a new experience.

**Child readiness** typically refers to a child's ability to make a smooth transition to school and learn effectively in that environment.

**School readiness** refers to the school's ability to respond effectively to all children at their different developmental levels, and to address parents' desires and needs.

**Family readiness** refers to the family possessing the necessary information, support, and confidence to help its child make the transition to school.

**Community readiness** refers to the community providing support and resources to all children and families to ensure early development and learning success.

**Registration** – The process where parents sign-up their child for kindergarten at a particular school and provide requested information.

**Screening** – A brief assessment process used by teachers to observe children to better understand their development. If developmental concerns are suspected during the screening, referrals for a more thorough evaluation may be recommended.

**Special Needs** – Although every child's needs are special, this term typically refers to developmental or medical needs of children who are considered eligible for special services or accommodations.

**Step-Up Day** – An orientation session where children attend kindergarten for a "practice day" with other in-coming kindergartners before school starts. This may happen in the spring or summer. Step-Up Days often include a ride on the school bus.

**Transition** – Transition refers to the process of moving from one environment to another, in this case to kindergarten from somewhere else (home, child care, Head Start, etc.). Transition is a process, not a single event. The term also has special significance for children receiving special education services because an important part of the IEP addresses transition planning.

# OFF TO KINDERGARTEN

## REGISTRATION AND SCREENING

Before your child may attend kindergarten, he or she must be registered with the school so they can be prepared for him. Registration and screening are two different things, but they often happen at the same time. Registration and screening for most kindergarten programs begin in the spring, but you may register your child for school during the summer if necessary. While some procedures may differ from school to school, most are similar.

**Questions families may ask:**

- How old does my child have to be to attend kindergarten? When is the cut-off date?
- What if my child misses the cut-off date by a few days but is ready for and eager to attend school?
- What is the purpose of registration and screening?
- How long will it take?
- What should I bring?
- Who should attend?
- What if I miss the scheduled dates for registration or screening?
- If my child already attends a preschool program sponsored by the school, do I need to attend registration or screening?
- How can I inform the school about my child's unique characteristics?

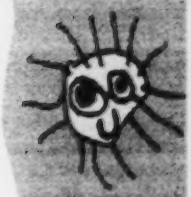
## KINDERGARTEN PLACEMENT

Some schools have different options such as morning or afternoon classes, half- or full-day kindergarten, and different teachers while other schools may offer a single kindergarten option. As the end of the school year approaches, decisions are made concerning which kindergarten class a child will be placed in. Decisions may not be finalized, however, until just before school starts in the Fall.

**Questions families may ask:**

- Are there choices for kindergarten placement (morning or afternoon classes, full day or half day programs, multi-age, etc.)?
- May I request a specific teacher for my child?
- How are placement decisions made, and what is my role as a parent in the decision?
- When will my child know who the teacher will be and how will we find out?
- Are placement decisions final? If not, with whom do I speak to about my concerns with the decision?

***Other questions you may have:***



## ORIENTATION

Many schools provide opportunities for children and parents to get to know the kindergarten environment before the first day of school. Sometimes orientation involves visits to the school for a "practice" or "step-up" day, special rides on the bus with other new kindergartners, meetings with teachers at school, or home visits. At some schools, orientation is held at the same time as kindergarten registration and screening.

**Questions families may ask:**

- How can my child get to know the school before beginning kindergarten?
- If I can't attend the scheduled orientation, will there be other opportunities for my child and me to become familiar with the school?
- Is my child required to attend orientation?
- Can someone else (child care provider, relative, friend, etc.) bring my child to orientation?
- Is there a separate orientation for parents? When is it?
- Is there a Parent Handbook and when will I receive it?

## SCHOOL CALENDAR AND SCHOOL DAY

Schools throughout the state operate on different calendars or daily schedules. Families need information as early as possible about the school calendar and school day to help prepare their children for the transition. This information is also important as families plan for child care, transportation, or other necessary arrangements.

**Questions families may ask:**

- When does the school year begin and end?
- When are vacations and other days off?
- What is the daily schedule for my child's kindergarten session?
- What kinds of activities will happen during my child's school day?
- Will meals or snacks be served during the kindergarten session?
- How are young children's toileting needs addressed?
- Does the school provide or help arrange before- or after-school care?
- How will I be informed of emergency school closings?

*Other questions you may have:*

## GETTING TO SCHOOL

Getting to and from kindergarten is an important consideration for children and parents. Families need to be assured that their children will arrive at school and return home safely and reliably. Transportation arrangements differ from school to school.

**Questions families may ask:**

- Does the school provide bus transportation for kindergarten children and what is the schedule?
- How and when will I learn about the bus schedule?
- How is my child's safety assured, on the bus or as a child walking to and from school?
- How can I meet other parents who might be willing to arrange car pools?
- What are the school's policies on child safety restraints, discipline on school buses, and drop-off/pick-up procedures with a designated adult?
- Can my child be transported to or from a location other than home (e.g., child care, relative)? Do I need to do anything to make these arrangements?
- Will my child have a chance to practice his/her transportation arrangements before the first day?
- What special transportation accommodations are made for children with special needs?
- What happens when someone else needs to pick up my child?

## THE CLASSROOM TEACHER AND CURRICULUM

The kindergarten teacher is a very important and influential person in the young child's life. Families and children both feel more comfortable about starting kindergarten when they c. n make a personal connection with the classroom teacher. Having some idea about the curriculum and teacher expectations also helps families prepare their children for school.

**Questions families may ask:**

- Who will be my child's teacher and when will we meet her or him?
- What does the teacher expect of my child, and what are those expectations based on?
- How can I provide information about my child to his or her teacher?
- How will I know what things my child will be working on throughout the year?
- What kinds of knowledge and skills should we be helping our child develop so that he will have a successful kindergarten experience?
- What other adults (nurses, principal, counselor, physical education teacher, etc.) will my child interact with, and how can we meet them?
- Will my child have time to play in kindergarten?
- How will the school keep me informed about my child's progress?

***Other questions you may have:***

## PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL

Children whose parents are involved in their schooling will have a greater chance for success. Schools invite parents to become involved from the beginning of their child's school experience in many ways.

**Questions families may ask:**

- How can I participate in my child's school experience, in and out of the classroom?
- What should I provide for school (supplies, snacks, clothing, etc.)?
- Does the school offer opportunities to help me connect with other parents, especially those with kindergarten children?
- To whom do I go if I have questions or concerns?
- How do I contact the school over the summer?
- What can I do to prepare myself for my child's first day of kindergarten?
- Is there a parents' organization that works with teachers and administrators on important school and community issues?

*Other questions you may have:*

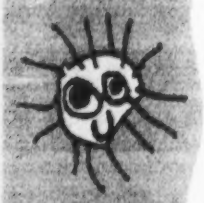
## UNIQUE ACCOMMODATIONS

Every child entering kindergarten is a unique individual, bringing special interests, abilities, and needs. Attempts must be made to make sure that every child's special characteristics are considered to make the transition to school smooth and successful. All families should have an opportunity to share information about their child with the school.

Some children may have unique needs that were not addressed prior to kindergarten. Schools should be responsive to all families' situations and work together with parents. Families of children receiving special education must have the opportunity to take part in decisions affecting their child's transition to kindergarten. (Also see Appendix 4)

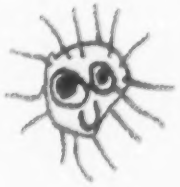
**Questions families may ask:**

- What do I do if I suspect that my child may have a special need?
- If I need to provide information about my child's unique needs, to whom do I talk?
- How are children's unique health needs addressed?
- Are the school building and bus accessible?
- What special school staff (guidance counselor, nurse, speech therapist, behavior specialist, occupational or physical therapist, instructional aide, etc.) are available to support my child and how do I contact them?
- If my child was served by Essential Early Education (EEE), how will her Individualized Education Plan (IEP) be handled?

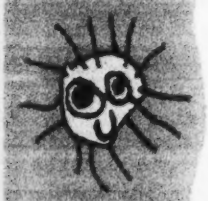


# In Conclusion

Going to kindergarten can be a very exciting event for children and families. As parents, caregivers, and schools work together to share a common understanding about transition, they can plan effective, positive experiences for children entering school. This, combined with adults listening to and speaking with children about going to kindergarten, contributes greatly to successful transitions. When everyone knows what to expect, children are more likely to head off to kindergarten with smiles on their faces and an eagerness to learn.



# APPENDICES



APPENDIX 1

# GUIDING CONCEPTS ON TRANSITIONS

1. Transitions should be viewed as an on-going process rather than a single event.
2. Transition planning should begin early and ensure sufficient time dedicated by all involved.
3. Transitions involve changes for the family as well as the child.
4. The family's dreams, concerns, values, culture, language and experiences should be elicited, listened to, and honored.
5. Those planning transitions must keep in mind the child's and family's strengths, needs and preferences.
6. The family must be encouraged and supported to take an active role in helping to plan their child's transition.
7. The family should be assisted in understanding how services and supports will be provided in the next environment.
8. A planning process must be developed that is outcome-based, written, followed, and clearly understood by all.
9. A collaborative spirit and partnership among all is to be promoted.
10. Coordination must be enhanced, alleviating duplication and overlap of services and efforts.
11. Regular contact among all team members must be assured.
12. Confidentiality for all parties concerned is respected.
13. A comprehensive plan is based on the child's and family's unique situation, not on labels or programs.
14. The number of changes, settings, evaluations, and new people that a child and family experience as a result of transition should be kept to a minimum.
15. When necessary, the child and family will be linked with naturally occurring supports and activities available in their own community. When none exist, they are created.
16. Children should be included and supported in community environments with their peers.
17. All existing strengths and resources of families, programs and communities will be examined and utilized.
18. Statewide equity and access to transition processes and resources for all children and families should be promoted.

*Developed and adopted by the Transition Committee of the Vermont Early Childhood Work Group, April 2000.*

APPENDIX 2

# HEART START: THE EMOTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS

***"A child's experiences in the first years of life determine whether he or she will enter school eager to learn or not."***

There are seven characteristics that equip children with a "school literacy;" that is, the knowledge of how to learn when they enter school.

**Confidence** - believing in yourself; believing that you are more likely than not to succeed at something.

**Curiosity** – the sense that finding out about new things is positive and enjoyable.

**Determination / Intention** – the wish and desire to pursue a goal with a sense of purpose and persistence; knowing that you can be effective.

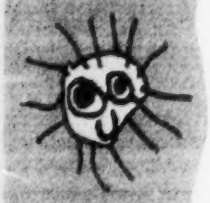
**Self- Control** – the ability to make decisions, control your actions, and express yourself appropriately; a sense of inner control.

**Relatedness** – being able to belong to a group; relating to and engaging with others; being in relationships with other children and adults.

**Capacity to Communicate** – having the ability and desire to exchange ideas, thoughts, and feelings with others; it is pleasurable interacting with others.

**Cooperation** – balancing your needs with those of others; a give-and-take that works for everyone

*ZERO TO THREE/ National Center for Clinical Infant Programs*



APPENDIX 2

# THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CHILDREN'S READINESS

- **Health and Physical Development**
- **Emotional Well-Being and Social Competence**
- **Approaches to Learning**
- **Communication Skills**
- **Intellectual Development & General Knowledge**

*National Education Goals Panel, 1997*

## HEALTH AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Healthy children enjoy a robustness that allows them to engage actively and vigorously in the full range of life experiences. Alert and energetic, they are able to give their full attention to learning experiences. When children do have health problems, treatment is essential to prevent harmful effects on children's school preparedness and success. In many cases, children with disabilities or chronic health problems are able to use their other strengths to compensate for the difficulties they experience from a potentially limiting condition.

Children's health - which is linked to school performance - is clearly an important aspect of school readiness.

## EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Children's school experiences are more positive and productive when they have a sense of personal well-being, grounded in stable, caring relationships in their early lives. Unhappy, fearful, or angry children are preoccupied, unable to give their full attention and engagement to learning experiences. A solid base of emotional security and social competence enables children to participate fully in learning experiences and form good relationships with teachers and peers. In building and maintaining such relationships, key social skills are:

- respecting the rights of others,
- relating to peers without being too submissive or overbearing, - being willing to give and receive support, and
- treating others as one would like to be treated.

## Approaches to Learning

Just as we adults approach our lives and work in different ways, children vary widely in their approaches to learning. Some children are playful and open to new learning tasks, while others are more deliberate and slower to experiment or take on new challenges. Following through on difficult tasks is natural to some children but foreign to others. Some children are far more reflective than others. Recognizing differences in individual's attitudes, habits, and learning is not new to anyone who knows children. We cannot help but see that children's school success, like adult's effectiveness in the workplace, depends not simply on academic skills but also on motivation, learning style, and habits and attitudes.

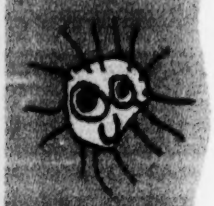
## Communication Skills

Through language, children are able to learn and communicate many things, from finding out how people in other countries live to telling school friends about something that happened at home. As children communicate with teachers and friends, and eventually through reading and writing, they develop understanding and acquire knowledge about various school subjects. Language proficiency has long been recognized as a key predictor of school success, and it is important to emphasize that communication skills are more than vocabulary or grammar. It is also important to recognize that there are wide variations in how children show their language competence, partly because of differing cultural and linguistic experiences they have had.

## Intellectual Development and General Knowledge

Young children are capable of knowing more than letters, numbers and shapes. To live is to learn, and by the time children enter school, they have already taken major steps in becoming competent learners. They are learning to observe and to note similarities and differences; they are developing skills in solving problems and in asking questions. By this age, children have also acquired many ideas about their natural and social world. They may think about where the rain comes from, why things live and die, and how cars move. Such skills and ideas, reflecting an array of experiences in the early years, are what enable children to gain knowledge and information that will help them in new learning situations.

*Taken from "Ready for School" (1997), National Education Goals Panel*



APPENDIX 4

# PROVISIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH UNIQUE ACCOMODATIONS

Some children enter kindergarten with significant developmental or medical challenges. To assure their appropriate participation in an educational program, special rights for eligible children are ensured through the federal Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

There are six principles of IDEA. They are:

- Free appropriate public education (FAPE)
- Evaluation
- Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- Least restrictive environment
- Parent and student participation in decision-making
- Procedural safeguards

There are clearly defined rights and responsibilities of children, families and schools in each of the above areas. While there is too much material describing IDEA to include in this appendix, there are excellent resources available for families seeking additional information.

Other children may enter school with challenges that do not qualify for special education services but are still significant (physical or mental disabilities that substantially limit their activities). Children in this situation may be eligible to receive additional services or accommodations to support their full participation in school through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

If you have questions or concerns, you should speak first with the schools (your child's teacher, principal, EEE teacher or special education administrator). If you have additional questions, you may want to contact the EEE Consultant or Special Education Office at the Vermont Department of Education (828-5110).

Vermont is also fortunate to have excellent organizations to help families understand special education services. Two of these organizations are:

**Parent to Parent of Vermont**
1 Main Street
Winooski, VT 05404
(802) 655-5290 or
1-800-800-4005
p2pvt@together.net
www.partoparvt.org

**Vermont Parent Information Center (VPIC)**
1 Mill Street, Suite A7
Burlington, VT 05401
(802) 658-5315 or
1-800-639-7170
vpic@together.net
www.vtpic.com

Both organizations offer personalized assistance to parents as well as having excellent, easy-to-understand materials. A few of VPIC's pamphlets provide facts about: *Parents' Rights in Special Education, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP),* and *What Parents Can Do When They Disagree With the School.*

APPENDIX 5

# SUGGESTED BOOKS TO SHARE WITH CHILDREN

*Franklin's New Friend* by Paulette Bourgeois & Brenda Clark

*Friends* by Helme Heine

*Froggy Goes To School* by Jonathan London

*How Have I Grown?* by Mary Reid

*Kindergarten Kids* by Senisi

*Making Friends* by Fred Rogers

*Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready For Kindergarten* by Joseph Slate

*Rachel Parker, Kindergarten Show-Off* by Ann Martin

*The Berenstain Bears Go To School* by Stan & Jan Berenstain

*That's What A Friend Is* by P.K. Hallinan

*We Are Best Friends* by Aliki

*When You Go to Kindergarten* by James Howe

*Will I have A Friend?* by Miriam Cohen

*For additional copies or permission to reprint, contact Jim Squires at Vermont Dept. of Education; 120 State Street; Montpelier, VT 05620 (tel. 802/828-3892) (email. <jsquires@doe.state.vt.us>).*